Religious Responses to "Selling Happiness": Consequences for Attitude toward the Ad and the Advertised Brand

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many brands sell their products with the promise that the consumer will experience happiness. Nesquick claims: "You can't buy happiness, but you can drink it." Hugo Boss sells a cologne as the "fragrance of happiness" while Coca-Cola started in 2009 its famous "Open Happiness" campaign. Intuitively, appealing to people's desire to be happy should be universally well received, or at least not harmful to consumer's perceptions of a brand; almost everyone wants to be happy and can relate to the desire to be happy.

However, advertising promoting attainment of happiness through material means may be unpalatable for some individuals; specifically, people who strongly adhere to their religious values, beliefs and practices, and use them in daily living (as Worthington et al. [2003] defined religiosity). In two studies, we examine the moderating role of religiosity on attitude toward ads promising happiness and toward the advertized brands. We show that the moderating role of religiosity on how people respond to these kinds of ads depends (1) on the motivational foundations of religious activity (intrinsic *vs.* extrinsic), and (2) on the salience of one's religiousness at the time of ad exposure.

Promising happiness through consumption is in essence promoting materialism as it conveys the message that one can be happy thanks to the acquisition of material objects. Yet, prior research shows that religiosity and materialism relate to subjective well-being in opposing directions, the former having a positive association while the latter has a negative one (e.g., La Barbera and Gürhan 1997). Burrough and Rindfleish (2002) suggest that the extent to which material values undermine subjective well-being depends on collective-oriented values, such as religious values, which are by definition antithetical to a materialistic lifestyle. More precisely, they theorize that motives underlying materialism (e.g., possession, self-centeredness) conflict with motives underlying religious values (e.g., moderation, humility). Such conflicts cause psychological tension, and thus lower subjective well-being.

Therefore, we expect that framing a product as offering happiness may cause a negative attitude toward the ad and the advertised brand, for religious people. We also predict that this response to "selling happiness" is bounded by whether individuals' religiosity is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. When one is intrinsically motivated in his/her religious activity, one should internalize religious teachings and incorporate them into his/her own system of values (Gorsuch and McPherson 1989). As such, for intrinsically religious individuals, attitude toward the ad and the advertized brand should be negative when it is framed as offering happiness through material means. In contrast, when one's religious activity is extrinsically motivated (e.g., motivated by the social benefits of religion), one should not find these ads aversive but attractive because those should be perceived as the means to achieve an end (i.e., happiness), just like religion.

> H1: Intrinsic religiosity should negatively moderate the effect of promising happiness in ad content on attitude toward the ad (H1a) and in turn toward the advertized brand (H1b).
> H2: Extrinsic religiosity should positively moderate the effect of promising happiness in ad content on attitude toward the ad (H2a) and in turn toward the advertized brand (H2b).

Religiosity has often been considered as a stable trait across situations (e.g., Hopkins et al. 2014). However, emerging research (e.g., Shachar et al. 2011) has begun to show that people are sensitive to religious stimuli and react differently between situations when religiousness has been primed. Extensive research have shown that subjective well-being or life satisfaction correlate positively with religion (see Lim and Putnam 2010 for a review). Because the pursuit of happiness resides at the heart of most religious and philosophical doctrines (Kesebir and Diener 2008), we hypothesize that religious people should find messages evoking happiness appealing, but only when religiousness is not salient. When it is salient, attention should be directed toward the discrepancy between collective-oriented values that religions preach and appeal to materialism made in the advertisement.

> H3: When religiousness is (*vs.* is not) salient, attitude toward the ad promising happiness should be less (more) favorable.

Study 1 (N=273) was conducted online recruiting American MTurkers and used a 3 (promising happiness: happiness *vs.* positivity *vs.* neutral) x 2 Continuous (intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity) between-subjects design (controlling for gender, age, income, religious affiliations, and general religiosity). Participants were first asked to complete the Religious Motivational Orientation (RMO) scale, designed to measure both intrinsic (8 items) and extrinsic (6 items) religiosity. Afterwards, they were randomly assigned to one of three print ads of a car: one promising happiness, one promising quality, and one identical to the happiness ad but without any tagline. Doing so allowed us to differentiate the promise of happiness from mere positivity. Finally, participants were asked to complete two sets of questions to measure attitude toward the ad (Aad) and attitude toward the advertized brand (Ab) (3 items each).

We conducted two moderated mediation analyses (Hayes 2013, model 75) in order to compare the neutral ad to the happiness ad, on the one hand, and the neutral ad to the positivity ad, on the other (see figures 1A and 1B, respectively). Results of study 1 supported the first two hypotheses. Specifically, the conditional effect of the comparison between the happiness ad and the neutral ad on Aad was negative when intrinsic religiosity was high and extrinsic religiosity was low ($\theta_{([\text{Baseline vs. Happiness ad}] \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\ \text{RMO\_I} = 3.46|\ \text{RMO\_E} = 1.14} = -1.76$, $t(251) = -2.35$, $p = .020$), and positive when intrinsic religiosity was low and extrinsic religiosity was high ($\theta_{([\text{Baseline vs. Happiness ad}] \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\ \text{RMO\_I} = 1.77|\ \text{RMO\_E} = 3.05} = 2.21$, $t(251) = 2.90$, $p = .004$).

Study 2 (N=518) recruited American participants from an online panel, and replicated study 1 with two notable differences. First, in order to isolate causality, we primed religiousness by asking participants to complete the RMO scale either before or after the stimulus advertisement and the Aad/Ab questions. Second, we examined our predictions using a low-involvement product category: a soft drink. As such, study 2 used a 2 (promising happiness: neutral *vs.* happiness) x 2 (religiousness: neutral vs. salient) x Continuous (intrinsic religiosity) between-subjects design (controlling for gender, age, income, religious affiliations, general religiosity, and attitude toward the product category).

We found a significant three-way interaction on Aad (Est. = -1.33, $p = .003$). Further investigations revealed that the conditional effect of the comparison between the neutral ad and the happiness ad on Aad was indeed negative when intrinsic religiosity was high and religiousness salient ($\theta_{([\text{Neutral vs. Happiness}] \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\ \text{Salient religiousness}|\ \text{RMO\_I} = 4.02} = -.73$, $t(496) = -2.02$, $p = .044$), but positive when religiousness was not salient ($\theta_{([\text{Neutral vs. Happiness}] \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\ \text{Neutral religiousness}|\ \text{RMO\_I} = 4.02} = .72$, $t(496) = 1.91$, $p = .057$). A moderated mediation analysis (Hayes 2013, model 72) found support for our model (see figure 2).

The potential influence of religiosity on perceptions of brands offering people happiness is not trivial, given that much of the world's population holds some kind of belief in God. Therefore, understanding how religiosity influences ad and brand perception, particularly in the context of brands increasingly attempting to appeal to people's desire for happiness, is an important avenue for research.

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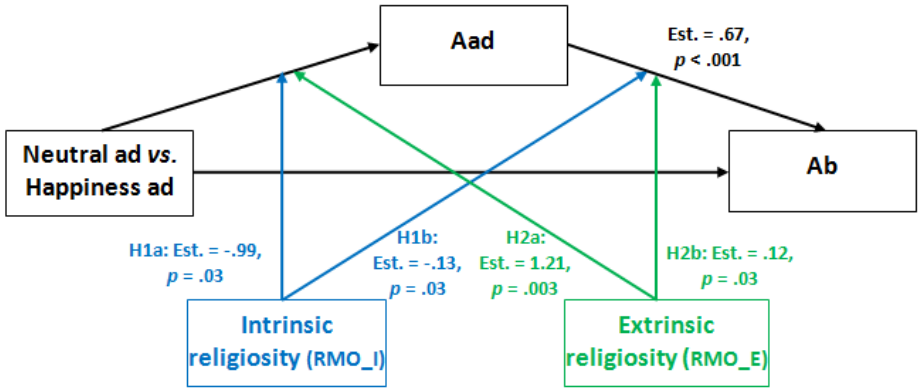
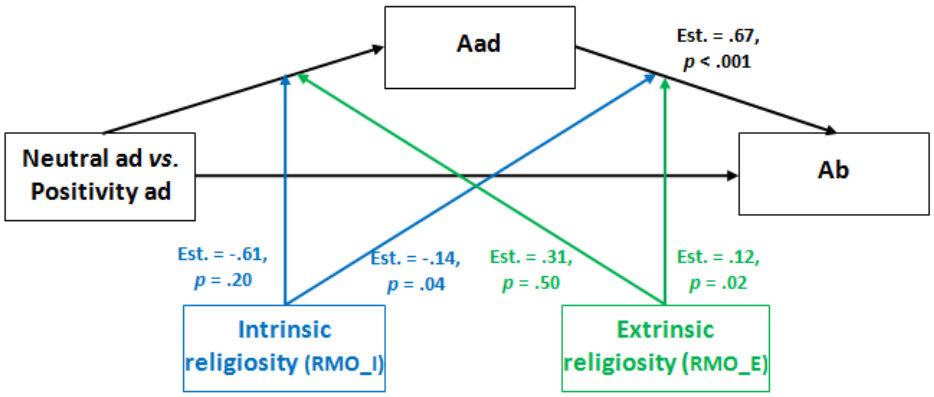
Figure 1A: Moderated mediation analysis (study 1 – Neutral ad *vs.* Happiness ad)



Significance of the indirect effect of [Neutral ad *vs.* Happiness ad] on Ab through Aad, based on 5000 bootstrapped samples, when:

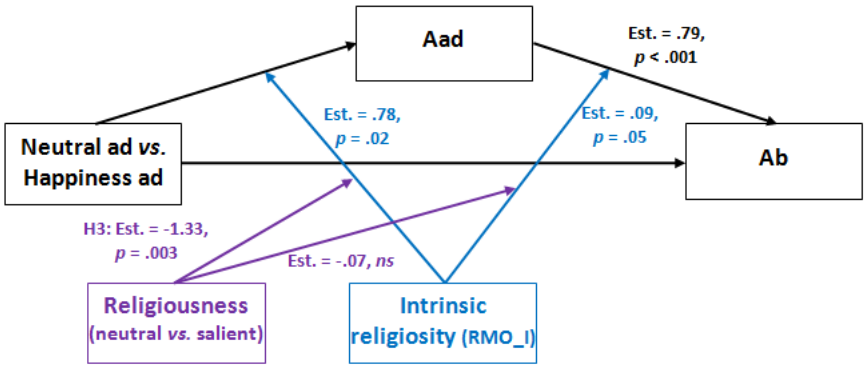
- RMO_I was low and RMO_E was high: effect = 1.64 (95% CI = 0.5648 to 2.9413)
- RMO_I was high and RMO_E was low: effect = -.61 (95% CI = -1.5229 to -0.0106)

Figure 1B: Moderated mediation analysis (study 1 – Neutral ad *vs.* Positivity ad)



Non significance of the indirect effect of [Neutral ad *vs.* Positivity ad] on Ab through Aad, in any case, based on 5000 bootstrapped samples.
Note: 95% confidence intervals correspond to one-tailed tests (our hypotheses being directional) with application of a Bonferroni correction for multiple tests

Figure 2: Moderated mediation analysis (study 2)



Significance of the indirect effect of [Neutral ad *vs.* Happiness ad] on Ab through Aad, based on 5000 bootstrapped samples, when:

- RMO_I was high and religiousness neutral: effect = .53 (90% CI = 0.0679 to .9810)
- RMO_I was high and religiousness salient: effect = -.48 (90% CI = -.9427 to -0.0600)